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SUBJECT: GOT SPINS FM ABDALLAH'S VISIT TO WASHINGTON IN THE  
PRESS

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Hudson; reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

1.(C) Summary. On October 19, 2005, all Tunisian papers prominently covered FM Abdallah's visit to Washington, with headlines above the fold proclaiming "Bush expresses his friendship and profound esteem for Ben Ali." All papers placed the text of a Tunisian Press Agency (TAP) report on Abdallah's visit to Washington, which covered the words exchanged with President Bush and Abdallah's meetings with Senators Stevens and Lugar. On October 21, all but one daily ran headlines such as "Tunisian Role in the Region and on the International Scene Highly Appreciated by Washington" and "Mutual Willingness to Reinforce Bilateral Relations." These headlines were accompanied by the text of another TAP article listing the people (SecState, A/S Welch, Ambassador Gross, and Congressmen Ackerman and Taylor) with whom FM Abdallah met and summarizing all of his meetings in a positive light. These articles are clearly a GOT attempt to convince the Tunisian public that it has strong backing from the USG at a time when it feels increasing pressure to undertake human rights reform in the run-up to the WSIS. End Summary.

2.(U) On October 19, 2005 all Tunisian papers provided prominent coverage of FM Abdallah's visit to Washington with all headlines stating "Tunisia-USA: Bush Expresses his Friendship and his Profound Esteem for Ben Ali." Sub-headlines in most papers continued "The Minister of Foreign Affairs Takes Part in the White House Iftar Offered by the American President in Honor of the Muslim Diplomatic Corps" and "Admiration of American Senators for Tunisia, its Leadership and its Accomplishments." These headlines were accompanied by the text of one article generated by the government-controlled news agency TAP. Translation of the article in para 5.

3.(U) On October 21, 2005, all but one private French language paper ran headlines stating "Tunisia-USA: Mutual Willingness to Reinforce Bilateral Relations" and "Tunisia-USA Meeting Between the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the American Secretary of State: Tunisian Role in the Region and on the International Scene Highly Appreciated by Washington." These headlines were accompanied again by the same TAP article reporting on Abdallah's meetings with the Secretary, A/S Welch, Ambassador Gross, and Congressmen Ackerman and Taylor. The coverage of the SecState meeting focused on the "excellent relationship of friendship and cooperation that exists between the US and Tunisia, as well as their (the USG) satisfaction with the partnership in a variety of areas, particularly concerning current international events." The coverage of the meeting with A/S Welch echoed these same sentiments, while the reporting on the meeting with Ambassador Gross focused on US hopes that "Tunisia assures the conditions for success" of the WSIS meeting. Translation of the article in para 6.

4.(C) Comment. This news coverage on US-American relations is clearly a GOT attempt to highlight USG support during a time when the GOT is increasingly under scrutiny and pressure from many quarters, including the USG, to undertake human rights reform (particularly in the area of a free press and free

assembly) in the run-up to the WSIS. The fact that the coverage (identical headlines and articles) was exactly the same in both the government and private newspapers only further demonstrates the extent of GOT control over the media. End Comment.

5.(U) Translation of September 19 TAP article:

"Mr. Abdelwaheb Abdallah, Minister of Foreign Affairs, undertook a working visit to the United States on Monday in the context of friendly relations and cooperation between the two countries.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs was invited by President George W. Bush to an Iftar dinner that he offered at the White House to members of the Muslim diplomatic corps accredited to Washington and to leaders of the Muslim community in the U.S. On this occasion, Mr. Abdelwaheb Abdallah transmitted to the American President the regards of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and his best wishes for progress and continued prosperity for the friendly American people.

For his part, President George Bush asked the Minister of Foreign Affairs to transmit to President Ben Ali his expression of friendship and profound esteem, recalling in this regard the fruitful meeting that he had with President Ben Ali during his visit to Washington in February 2004.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs additionally met Monday with Senator Ted Stevens (Republican-Alaska), Chairman of the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation and member of the Budget Committee and the Internal Security Committee, as well as with the Republican Senator from Indiana Richard Lugar, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

These meetings were the occasion for an exchange of views on the state of bilateral relations and the principal international and regional questions of common concern.

Senator Stevens expressed his admiration for Tunisia, for its leadership and for the accomplishments it had realized in diverse domains. He paid homage to the constructive role that Tunisia had played in the regional and international scene and asked the Minister of Foreign Affairs to transmit his highest regards for President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali whom he had the pleasure of meeting during his last visit to Tunisia.

For his part, Senator Richard Lugar indicated that he was following with interest the political, economic and social reform underway in Tunisia, as well as the achievements in these areas, promising to continue to work to reinforce the relations between the two friendly countries."

6.(U) Translation of September 21 TAP article:

"Pursuant to his visit to Washington, Mr. Abdelwaheb Abdallah, Minister of Foreign Affairs, met Tuesday with the American Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. This meeting permitted the two officials to highlight the excellent friendly and cooperative relations that exist between the US and Tunisia, as well as their satisfaction with the partnership established between the two countries in a variety of areas and notably in that which concerns the current international issues.

The American Secretary of State expressed, on this occasion, the appreciation of the US for the role played by Tunisia in the region and on the international scene, highlighting the importance of an exchange of visits between officials of both countries in order to reinforce bilateral relations.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs also met with Mr. David Welch, Assistant Secretary for the Middle East and North Africa. He reviewed with the American official the state and the future of Tunisian-American relations, as well as the principal bilateral issues and current international issues.

In his meeting with Mr. David Gross, US Coordinator for the Policy of International Communications and Information, Mr. Abdelwaheb Abdallah spoke of the preparations underway in Tunisia as host of the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society, highlighting the hope of Tunisia to assure the conditions for success for this international conference. On his part, Mr. Gross underlined the importance of the summit in Tunis, expressing his hope that it will be a success.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs also met with Congressman Gary Ackerman, Democrat from the state of New York and member of the Committee on Foreign Relations in the House of Representatives, and with Congressman Charles Taylor, Republican from the state of North Carolina and member of the Budget Committee. These meetings permitted a review of the state of cooperative and friendly relations between Tunisia and the United States, as well as ways to reinforce them."

HUDSON